

Te Whakahoki

Penny Howard (Te Mahurehure, Ngāpuhi) was impelled to create the paintings and drawings in this body of work through a profound sense of anger. Her perusal of recent online sales of historic Māori artefacts – taonga tūturu – at the British auction house, Sothebys, at huge prices, motivated her to re-capture them. And by extending from their photographic images, she is ensuring they are brought back to us, if not literally, at least figuratively: te hokinga ki tēnei kāinga o Aotearoa New Zealand. Penny is re-claiming our existential heritage and her work incorporates not only these taonga, but also the red thread of te mauri interconnecting Māori, and them as always living tūpuna or ancestors ever deeply vested to the land. More, her depiction of ngā manu – birds – in her drawings, is a further visceral embodiment of this ever-present spiritual interconnectedness of taonga and the entire Māori ethos; te ao Māori katoa. The birds are kaitiaki of these taonga, ready to escort them back to where they ontologically belong. They were always ready to return to the landscapes backgrounding the paintings: just look at their eyes.

It is important to note that all the taonga represented in this work – and of course many more such treasures – have been in the hands of Pākehā collectors for at least two centuries. How were they first obtained? Some were traded for such articles as tobacco, axes and pots, to early whalers and sealers. Others were somehow attained by first-contact collectors such as Joseph Banks. Some were sold for minimal sums of money by later colonial collectors. Others were traded by local New Zealand museums, in their effort to obtain similar indigenous artefacts from overseas. Some were stolen outright.

However, many more were gifted by various iwi Māori as part of a reciprocal arrangement when services had been provided and when agreements had been formalised between 'early' Pākehā and Māori, including on occasions when Māori sought some sort of protection from these colonial forces, or expressed their own commitment to the Commonwealth.

Importantly, such is the length of time associated with the attainment of such taonga, concrete provenance has not always been established for them: Sothebys only notes who 'owned' them after they were obtained from Māori as their rationalisation of the 'right' to on-sell. For example, Lot 109, the mighty Ku Ko Kahukanui is unashamedly 'explained' by, "The recorded European history of this sculpture begins with the Viennese collector Friedrich Wolff (1890-1949), known from 1935 as Frederick Wolff-Knize." And the estimated price range in 2018, when offered, was US\$200-300,000!

The key to these early transactions is this. Māori generally gave taonga in a spirit of expectation that the receiver would in some way reciprocate, if not in kind, at least in some mutually beneficial way.

Such gifting, indeed, such early trading as based on this tenet of reciprocity, has not been met by the receivers of Māori largesse. For while these taonga can sell for prices well over one million US dollars – as in the 2014 Sothebys 'offering' of Te Pou Whakairo - these monies do not filter back to this country. Accordingly, the taonga themselves remain overseas, based in museums or in the hands of private collectors, often sight unseen until the next overseas auction. Indeed, the heritage of this latter intricately carved piece is described in rather off-handed fashion as, "According to information...from the owner of the...statue during its rediscovery in the attic of a country house in Scotland, the latter 'had been

acquired by one of his ancestors, a sailor who brought it back in Scotland in the early 1830s.'" The word 'respect' does not seem to feature in the vocabulary of such collectors and their collaborators.

I can only commend Penny Howard for her vision, her mahi. In re-capturing these taonga she is providing further momentum to our bringing our tūpuna home. In her visual exposition of the imbalance ensured by Sothebys and its creed of commodification, she further enforces what Rana Waitai said about them and their ilk, as "a tarted up, unscrupulous shark that was legally pawning off cultural treasures" (quoted in Howard, K, Repatriation of Māori Figure Not Expected. *The Dominion*, 24 November. 1998.)

Ko te tāima mō te whakahoki ināiane. Tēnā koe Penny.

Vaughan Rapatahana